Promoting digital media literacy through magazines

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Abstract

Many investigations into improving levels of digital media literacy have focused on the technology itself and the skill level of users. Traditional media has long been a source of information for people and yet little investigation has been conducted into using traditional media such as magazines for improving digital media literacy levels in a non-intrusive way. As traditional media is still an important way to disseminate information and while Australians continue to be high consumers of print magazines, it seemed a logical progression to investigate as a starting point whether technology is discussed or visually present within the pages of some of our highest circulating magazines. The focus of this paper is on a Nintendo advertorial printed in *The Australian Women's Weekly* (AWW) in November 2010. The advertorial offered insights into six Australian womens' experiences of using a Nintendo during a demonstration day. Combining aspects of digital media literacy with potential literacy tools of magazines, this paper considers the advertorial as part of a non-intrusive educative approach to increasing digital media literacy through promotional messages.

Introduction

Many studies about digital media literacy are from the position of whether people have access (Bell, 2009; Palmer, 2011), in which locations they access computers (Ewing and Thomas, 2010; Palmer, 2011; MMV, 2004) and whether people have the skills to use technology (Bell, 2009; Ewing and Thomas, 2010; Hargaittai, 2002). Another position is to ask what existing technologies people use that can be best utilised to assist them with developing knowledge and understanding about digital media literacy. As a way of understanding how to improve digital media literacy this paper investigates how a print publication may be of use in developing and/or improving digital media literacy. There are many specialist publications in relation to technology such as *TechLife*, *Windows Australia*, *The Official Magazine*, *Australian Macworld*, *Wired*, and *Desktop* but our research question was posed with non-specialist publications in mind. Those seeking to increase their understanding of technology may find using specialist publications daunting and intimidating as many assume that their readers have some existing understanding of the technologies involved. Thus our research question asks, how can a non-specialist publication assist in improving digital media literacy?

For the purposes of this paper we chose Australia's highest circulating and iconic women's publication, *The Australian Women's Weekly* (AWW) which has a current circulation of 470,331, a readership of just over two million, and forms 56% of the mass magazine market share (ACP, 2012; Bauer Media Group, 2013). A quick glance at the shelves of the local newsagency shows that magazines targeted towards the younger demographic contain a lot of technological references such as URLs to further information on news stories, Facebook feeds, clear links and synergies between online content, and that in the magazine, and more specifically articles dedicated to improving their personal content on the Internet such as how to improve their LinkedIn profile. From a similar newsagency glance the AWW contains few of these references, which reduces the opportunity for people unfamiliar with technology to become familiar with it and to develop or increase their digital literacy skills.

The Australian Women's Weekly

Women's magazines are a popular media source in Australia and have been since the introduction of *The Australian Women's Weekly* (AWW) in 1933 (Kershaw, 2010). The AWW has an enduring influence on Australians and, while other Australian women's magazines such as *Woman's Day* and *New Idea* have been around for nearly as long,

significantly neither of these has achieved the iconic status of the AWW (McKay, 2003: 178). Griffin-Foley suggests that the early success of the AWW was due to a number of factors that included that it was "as much a newspaper as a magazine, with special reports on topical matters of interest to women" and so it was "an immediate hit with readers and advertisers" (Griffin-Foley, 2004: 540). In her article "The Paradox in Ageing Well", McKay (2003: 183) comments that there is a synergy between editorial content and advertising in the AWW as with many mass market magazines which appeals and works well with both readers and advertisers alike.

From the outset the AWW was designed to be a "national cultural institution" (Sheridan et al., 2002 as cited in Kershaw, 2010: 6). As Griffin-Foley (1999: 33) points out, "the magazine believed it had a role to play in setting the agenda: the first edition declared that it aimed not merely to cover, but to *create*, interests for women (emphasis in the original). This mind set could prove invaluable for being leaders in educating Australians in digital media literacy in an era when a National Broadband Network is being rolled out and connectivity for all Australians is imminent. Complementary to this Griffin-Foley (1999: 33) remarks that in the 1950s the AWW and other women's magazines reinforced domestic issues for women at a time when machines offered the "promise to liberate women from domestic labour". Disappointingly this is in line with what is continuing today when similar female contextualised issues continue to be addressed "across the array of women's magazines but not in men's magazines" (Kershaw, 2010: 7). Only the private sphere is discussed in women's magazines and as Kershaw (2010: 7) comments, this includes coverage of how celebrities deal with their private lives rather than their careers or public contributions. However, it could be argued that becoming familiar with technology and increasing digital media literacy should be part of private sphere discussions now that many Australian households boast multiple television sets, computers and other digital devices scattered throughout the home (ACMA, 2009: 7). So while our national publication is well placed for performing as a leader, instead it continues to downplay its role as a 'national cultural institution' where media culture is concerned. Perhaps part of the explanation for the content approach lies in that magazines are far more likely than newspapers "to be seen as leisure, entertainment or light reading" (Kershaw, 2010: 2). Yet the casual approach could also be opportune for learning.

Digital Media Literacy

The diversity of devices, forms of connections (wireless, fixed and mobile), along with the burgeoning forms of communication applications such as social networking and telephony applications such as Skype, all bring a greater emphasis on keeping skilled and up to date with the use of technology. Digital media literacy encompasses knowledge about the technology as well as the skill to use it. The Department of Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy recognises that "digital media literacy is a dynamic concept" and that skills will vary depending on individual circumstances, and that these skills can be self-taught or can form part of a formal educational program at any stage in life (DBCDE, 2013).

Many Australians own technology but do not understand beyond the basics about their device or application. In the AIMIA 2008 Mobile Phone Lifestyle Index respondents were asked if they had a 3G phone and 20% replied "I don't know" (Mackay and Weidlich, 2008: 29). Mackay and Weidlich (2008) suggests that this is more a reflection of the low levels of digital media literacy of the mobile phone owners as well as the telecommunication providers' neglect in providing appropriate education to their consumers (ibid.).

Many potential consumers make deliberate choices not to purchase technology others would like to but for other reasons, such as lack of confidence, decide not to use digital technologies. The categories of non-use proposed by Wyatt, Thomas and Terranova (2002) offer a useful and alternative view on a group that could be easily be misread as 'have nots' rather than as 'want nots'. Wyatt et al.'s first category or group 'resisters' consists of people "who have never used the Internet because they do not want to" (Wyatt et al., 2003: 76). The second group, called 'rejecters', are people who have stopped using the Internet voluntarily. Wyatt et al. (2003: 76) suggest multiple reasons for voluntary rejection; the Internet holds no interest for them, financial reasons, or they are able to source information efficiently through other channels. The third group, called 'no access', are people such as those experiencing difficulties such as access to a computer or lack of Internet connectivity. The fourth group are people 'expelled' and have stopped using it involuntarily because of cost or lack of access (Wyatt et al., 2003: 76). In this paper we are not exploring a particular group as identified by Wyatt et al., but are investigating non-intrusive methods to increase the digital media literacy levels of 'resisters' should they change their minds, and the two groups 'no access' and 'expelled' for when they do have access.

Magazines as a literacy tool

Magazines are valuable tools for promoting a wide range of cultural activities, people, events and important societal issues. Public relations and marketing tools such as advertisements, advertorials, and celebrity interviews assist in building important societal awareness campaigns about issues such as nutrition (Bonner et al., 2009; Hill and Radimer, 1996). Therefore this paper asks, why not use print magazines and specifically the AWW to build digital media literacy levels?

Magazines are great tools for building literacy because the content is read when current and when out of date (Kershaw, 2010: 2). Ytre Arne (2011: 219) uncovered two types of reading practices by women, the first being that women leave reading magazines until "the house has calmed down", as a reward, and often create rituals around their magazine reading. Ytre Arne (2011: 219) also uncovered that, for some of her participants, magazines are items that are "skimmed" "between other tasks" and contends that a "fragmented reading" is also part of the attraction of magazines. Magazines therefore are items that can be read thoroughly if time permits but generally information is presented in bite-sized chunks which for the purposes of education and awareness raising provide a gentle introduction to new material for learners. Importantly for learners who require different forms such as images and text, magazines have the ability to offer both. As McKay (2003: 179) notes, the AWW is a glossy publication by nature and relies on colour photographs as a means of primary visual communication. Non-specialist magazines are also written in everyday language rather than jargon specific to the technology as an Internet Service Provider might on their website.

Women often source health and nutrition information through magazines (Bonner et al., 2009; Hill and Radimer, 1996), and it seems logical that other types of information such as digital media literacy related information might also be sought this way if it was available. Although, as Kershaw (2010: 3) points out, "there can be a 'disguised dissonance' between the personal, close address of a magazine's texts and the relationship it builds between the reader and the magazine in comparison to the actual commercial relationship set up between consumer and product". There is a "deliberate confusion of consumer-as-reader and consumer-as-shopper" in magazines (Holmes, 2007 as cited in Kershaw, 2010: 3).

There are a range of specialist technology magazines that discuss devices, software, games and platform specific issues. However, to read and understand these magazines possibly takes a greater level of confidence than most people who are new to technology are willing to adopt. Magazine consumption also relies on readers being confident that the magazine will contain content of interest and that resonates with their daily lives (Ytre Arne, 2011: 220).

This may not be the case for people with no or low digital media literacy when confronted by the contents of a specialist magazine. Targeting digital literacy through magazines that non-adopters and low-level users regularly consume normalises technology in a way that promotes exploration and discovery by non-adopters and low-level users. It potentially makes the experience fun, informal, and familiar.

The advertorial as an educational tool for readers

To break through the advertising clutter and further enhance the effectiveness of communication with consumers, advertisers are increasingly developing new promotional tools and turning to less traditional forms of promotion. One such communication technique is an advertorial, defined as a print advertisement with theme features executed in the editorial style of a particular host publication (Goodlad et al., 1997; van Reijimersdal et al., 2005), often referred to as a publicity-style editorial. The growing use of advertorials is based on its enhanced believability over standard advertisements (Beenstock, 1998). Advertorials in print media have been viewed as one of the most trusted forms of media (Durham, 1998). This would be particularly important for technological innovations that need to establish awareness and reputation among consumers. Hence, unlike television, print advertorials may serve as a vehicle for consumer education as most of them provide large amounts of information allowing consumers to learn more about products or assist them with purchase decisions (Stapel, 1994). For example, studies on certain target markets (i.e. teenage children) report re-reading the same materials found in the magazines seven to ten times in a week (e.g., Lehmkuhl, 1993). Therefore, a repeat exposure of promotional material in advertorials could increase consumer familiarity with and preference for the promoted products, including technology and digital products. Despite the importance of marketing through print advertorials, there appears to be limited coverage of digital technology in Australian magazines.

The Nintendo advertorial

In the AWW November 2010 edition, Nintendo placed a six-page advertorial. The advertorial focused on the learning experiences of "six lucky readers" (AWW, 2010:181) in relation to the "new and improved Nintendo DSi XL" (AWW, 2010:182). (For the purposes of this paper the readers will be referred to as participants). The participants' ages ranged between

21 and 47. Taking part were four women in their forties (Lanore, 41; Anne, 44; Jenny, 45; and Fiona, 47), along with younger women Vanessa, aged 36 and Jessica, aged 21. All women had been offered an incentive to participate; the participants were flown to Sydney for the day, irrespective of their location, to participate in a Nintendo demonstration day and personal pampering which included hair and make-up in preparation for the photo shoot. The participants' day was hosted by Deborah Thomas, a previous editor of AWW, and in 2010 General Manager of ACP Women's Lifestyle (Magazines). Participants were presented with their own Nintendo DSi XL device and an expert.

Covering two pages of the advertorial, the participants' experiences were documented by Nintendo in individual sections. The sections included a photo of each participant using a Nintendo, their age and a direct quote. Also printed in the participants' sections were three categorised responses labelled 'Nintendo DSI XL Experience', 'What I most enjoyed', and 'Highlight of the Day'. The four additional pages contained a double page spread with 2 x 3 group photos of the six women and a brief explanation of what happened that day that could be loosely termed or referred to as a method (AWW, 2010: 180-181), and two pages that focused purely on advertising the features of the Nintendo device (AWW, 2010:182, 185). Each advertising page included an image of three of the women participants and a single quote from one of the female participants along with some information about the new Nintendo, a photo image of the Nintendo, logos and the company URL.

The advertorial 'participants'

In the advertorial three points were identified as relevant to digital media literacy; the use of experts, improved skills, and the confidence gained by the participants on the day. Participants also talked about the benefits to their children, and that they would be able to impress friends, family and their children with their new skills. There was the obvious inclusion of references to 'pampering' by the AWW and the features of the Nintendo device itself.

While conclusions cannot be solely based on edited highlights from what was discussed on the day, what was revealed in the advertorial was that some of the participants had used the gaming device before (Vanessa, Lanore, Anne and Jenny), but the majority expressed in their quotations some improvement in skills (Fiona, Lanore, Anne and Jenny). These insights printed in a high circulating magazine such as the AWW may provide an incentive to other

people to learn how to use more technology or even specifically a gaming device. Research indicates that peer-to-peer learning forms an important part of how people learn (Palmer, 2011).

This tactic of an advertorial could be very successful within the printed space of the AWW as it has a long history of treating readers "not only as consumers but as collaborators" (Griffin-Foley, 2004: 9). For example in the early 1930s Griffin-Foley (2004: 540) reports that the AWW invited readers to participate in a 'Preference Voting Coupon' in order to learn about the features they wanted included or not in the magazine. These initiatives were also viewed by Griffin-Foley (2004: 540) as building "dialogue with readers" to "project a feeling of communality". This was an extension of the concept by the readers of 'our paper', a sense of belonging to a community of readers beyond the front door of the individual's home (Griffin-Foley, 2004: 541). This sense of community assists with promoting talk about the content featured in the magazines and from an education perspective provides casual opportunities to learn.

The AWW's readership is part of a long established community built on generations of readers over 80 years (McKay, 2003: 178), so it is possible that people reading this advertorial will investigate how to use technology as a result of reading how the participants gained new skills and confidence by working with an expert thereby emulating the peer face–to-face relationship but in print.

Another tactic employed as part of the advertorial is the recreation of the participants as celebrities. By flying competition winners in from around the country and utilising hair and make-up services, the AWW recreated the participants and awarded them celebrity status for the day. Some readers may be drawn to the article through the tactic of recreating the participants as celebrities for the day as celebrity news and gossip forms part of the narrative of the AWW (McKay, 2003: 179). Often, as McKay (2003: 180) notes, celebrities are featured within the magazine within the context of a public relations and marketing exercise for an upcoming tour or book release, so this advertorial recreating readers as celebrities is in a sense normal within the narrative context of the magazine. It also fits neatly with Ytre Arne's (2011: 220) position of readers who "would feel cheated of the experience that they sought in magazine reading".

A few participants (Fiona, Anne and Jenny) also expressed how they felt having access to an expert. "I enjoyed the … experts giving me some one-on-one tips on how to use my new

Nintendo DSi XL. I never thought I'd be tech-savvy but they showed me how easy it is to use" (Fiona, 47). This supports academic research into building digital media literacy levels by having experts available for one-to-one sessions (MMV, 2004; Palmer, 2011) and also reinforces to readers that with some professional help they too may be able to learn how to use these devices.

Also, while an obvious selection of participant quotations included the features of the new Nintendo as is the purpose of an advertorial, comments such as "the built-in camera function is my favourite. I can take photos and upload to Facebook straight away" (Jessica, 21) demonstrate to non-adopters or those with low literacy levels how the device may be used in additional ways to the main function of gaming. It increases their understanding of how the device may be used in other ways that may appeal to readers, or that they already do with other devices, subtly building confidence in themselves and their abilities.

The advertorial 'advertising'

As can be expected of an advertorial there are two discrete sections of advertising text that relate directly to product promotion. In terms of placement, each section of text is nestled below a large photograph of three of the women with a direct quote embossed over the top of the photograph. The text in these sections explains the features of the Nintendo device as well as contrasting it with earlier versions. There are also accompanying photographs of the device so that the reader is able to view the device in five colours. The advertising text on page 182 highlights functional product benefits such as improved design, 100 additional games and a pre-installed camera with a built-in web browser. The text on page 185 stresses the benefits of Nintendo product information that readers will experience after acquiring a device such as particular games.

This advertorial potentially does confuse the reader in relation to whether they are reading educational content or whether it is aimed at them as consumers. As discussed earlier, Kershaw (2010: 3) contends that this is part of the narrative of the AWW's "'disguised dissonance" and "deliberate confusion of the consumer-as-reader and consumer-as-shopper'". This is a natural outcome because of the context of the advertorial, the use of readers as 'celebrities' and the less overt product placement. However, if this tactic is successful in

building literacy among readers then perhaps it should not be judged on the confusion aspect so much as the potential benefits as a learning tool.

Concluding thoughts

This initial content investigation into the potential of using non-specialist magazine advertorials as a non-intrusive education tool demonstrates that it maybe possible if the narrative of the magazine was taken into consideration. It appears that advertorials have a potential to combine the best from the two worlds that is from advertisers' point of view and also to the consumer's benefit in terms of the enhanced knowledge of technology products. Magazines could assist in closing the gap between digital technology and our understanding of it. First, it is reported that the readers tend to find the content of a print publication more trustworthy than information found in other types of media (Durham, 1998). Secondly, consumer perception is increasingly being shaped by visual imagery and this trend continues to advance within postmodern society. Thus, print advertorials have an opportunity to create more meaning through visual language, thereby facilitating consumer understanding of the written text. The tactic used by Nintendo of using real people/general public as celebrities will allow digital technology advertorials to communicate a somewhat abstract experience to a more realistic representation, thereby imbuing a message with personalised or lifestyle formats. This would be particularly important for catering to the target markets that have limited knowledge of technology or are resistant to learning more about it. The importance placed on relevant co-branding strategies between the advertiser and the magazine's audience is also high and will also impact how consumers will interpret the messages and learn about digital technology.

It is envisaged that further investigations wil be conducted, including interviews with appropriately targeted individuals such as non-adopters and low-level adopters, to provide an authentic understanding of how Australian readers perceive and read promotional messages about digital technology.

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